

SERGEANTS' TIME XXI

Training Today's Legacy and Interim Small Units in Transition

by Command Sergeant Major James L. DePriest

Before you begin reading this article, first consider the paragraph that begins on the bottom of page 3-5 of *FM 25-101, Battle Focused Training*:

"Some training time during the week should be devoted to the small-unit leader (such as a squad leader or vehicle commander) to train his unit. This enhances readiness and cohesion; it allows the junior NCO to learn and exercise the Army's training management system at the lowest level. The key is to train the trainer so that he can train his soldiers. This requires the NCO to identify essential soldier and small-unit and team tasks (drills) that support unit METL and then...

- To assess strengths and weaknesses.
- To formulate a plan to correct deficiencies and sustain strengths.
- To execute the training to standard."

There have been a number of articles published on Sergeants' Time in recent months. A significant number of Army units are continuing with business as usual, carrying out Sergeants' Time as they always have for the foreseeable future. But some units in transition — units that are changing equipment, mission, tactics, techniques, and procedures — cannot proceed as they always have if we are to produce competent, confident leaders for tomorrow's Army.

For these units especially, there must be a change of attitude in the noncommissioned officer corps, in the expectations of commanders, and in our educational systems. We must examine our training policy and develop new approaches to training individual and small unit collective tasks within our organizations, and to do this, commanders and noncommissioned officers must work together. *We can no longer tolerate the idea of officer and NCO business as separate entities. There can be only leader business.* If the Army's leadership fails to move forward in training management policy today, we will create a stagnation in the noncommissioned officer corps as the Army transforms.

Sergeants' Time could be very successful in the Cold War Army of the

1980s. Sergeants' Time became a templated event rigorously enforced by the sergeants major. There was complete chain of command support. We had one enemy, battle books on how to fight him, and every leader knew his actual wartime mission and where he was going to fight. Then, with the elimination of the Warsaw Pact as a primary threat, and a changing role for the Army, Sergeants' Time lost its focus.

A growing portion of the Army is beginning to experience life in the age of digital transformation, force restructure changes, and combat service support redesign. Imagine a heavy brigade being told to simultaneously conduct corps red cycle, division red cycle, field new command posts throughout the brigade, field Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2), train instructor key personnel (IKP), train FBCB2 operators, field the latest hardware of every other Army Battle Command System (ABCS), retrain every operator for those systems, and execute gunnery in three maneuver battalions — all simultaneously. Traditional Sergeants' Time cannot occur in this environment. Our information technology continues to grow. As soon as a system is fielded, it seems, it's almost obsolete. Feedback from operators and advances in technology create an unending spiral development process. And as the Army begins transition and training of the interim brigades, this scenario is bound to repeat itself.

My experience as a member of several boards has convinced me that junior noncommissioned officers have limited training management knowledge. Leader books are usually prepared for the board, but are absent of training data. Ask a soldier appearing to name a crew task and he will probably name an individual task, or have no answer at all. This is a failure of the unit and of the noncommissioned officer education system. We have failed "to train the trainer so that he can train his soldiers" (*FM 25-101*).

There is some discussion within the Army that *FM 25-101, Battle Focused Training*, is a Cold War document and is obsolete. But I believe our training

policy and principles are sound. However, units can no longer simply be green, amber, or red. Simultaneous prime time training and support mission accomplishment is becoming the norm, rather than the exception. In regards to Sergeants' Time, there should be only minor changes in our doctrine. Opportunity training can become the time for first-line leaders to train their soldiers. But a templated event is increasingly difficult to support given today's fast-paced operational tempo (OPTEMPO).

How do we define Sergeants' Time XXI? **Sergeants' Time XXI is the execution of the commanders' training guidance at the lowest collective and individual level.** Every commander is required to know his unit's Mission Essential Task List and its assessment. It follows the same logic that first-line leaders know their small unit collective (crew/team/squad) tasks that support their platoon collective tasks, and their assessment. The first-line leader must also know the leader and soldier tasks that comprise the small unit collective tasks. He must know if his soldiers are a go or no-go in these tasks. How many leaders know the difference between collective and individual tasks or assessment and evaluation?

Sergeants' Time XXI cannot be only "NCO business" if it is to be "the execution of the commanders' training guidance at the lowest collective and individual level." This is not different from what is expressed in *FM 25-101*. We do not have time to allow first-line leaders to train on anything they want without specific guidance because the time available in today's Army simply does not allow it. As commanders execute training in accordance with their commanders' guidance, so must Sergeants' Time XXI be the execution of that guidance at the lowest level.

We seldom hold leaders accountable for Sergeants' Time today. Selecting one time in the week for Sergeants' Time is outdated and must change. First-line leaders must take advantage of every opportunity to train their soldiers. Leaders at every level must do

much better at time management. The senior leaders must develop new methods for time management of units. Green, amber, and red simply no longer apply. We all must help develop first-line leaders into better time managers.

First-line leaders today must be able to think collectively as well as individually in training management. They must understand what crew/team/squad tasks their unit must accomplish in support of the platoon collective tasks. They must have a means, a training and evaluation outline, in which to assess their small unit tasks. They must know the leader and soldier tasks that support the small unit tasks. They must know the evaluation of these tasks for all of their soldiers. First-line leaders must be able to convey to their platoon leadership what training their soldiers need. Platoon training meetings and well-documented leader books are invaluable to accomplishing this. Leader books must be a working tool.

I offer 11 small unit collective tasks and 11 soldier tasks that form the foundation of Sergeants' Time XXI for any organization — combat, combat support, or combat service support. The crew/team/squad tasks are:

Execute Pre-Combat Inspection - This is loading your equipment in preparation for movement by rail or for tactical operations. It includes vehicles and containers. It is also inspection of vehicles and equipment in a tactical environment prior to combat operations.

Maintain/Troubleshoot Equipment - This is the ability to perform preventive maintenance checks and services on all of your equipment and understanding the troubleshooting procedures outlined in the technical manuals.

Operate Equipment - This includes all assigned equipment.

Acquire and Engage Targets - This is with the M16A2, SAW, or from the gunner's station of a tank, whatever the soldier's primary weapon.

Occupy a Fighting Position - This is a crew-served fighting position or a vehicle fighting position, including range cards and sector sketches, analog and digital.

Conduct Casualty Evacuation - This is the ability to assess injuries, apply life-saving measures, and move the casualty to a safe location.

React to an NBC Hazard - This may include such things as chemical detection and unmasking procedures, as well as attaining an appropriate mission-oriented protective posture.

Conduct Hasty Decontamination - This is the decontamination of our vehicle and equipment by organic assets.

Establish a LP/OP.

Conduct Mobility, Counter-Mobility, and Survivability Actions - This includes actions such as setting up a hasty protective minefield, clearing a breach lane, or executing other expedient obstacles.

Execute Risk Management Procedures - This is the ability of the small unit leader to recognize danger and proceed with the mission with the least risk.

The individual soldier tasks are:

Report Enemy Information.

Send and Receive a Radio or Information Management System Message.

Engage Targets.

Operate Night Vision Devices.

Maintain Vehicle and Equipment.

Operate Vehicle and Equipment.

React to NBC Hazard.

Decontaminate Self and Equipment.

Evaluate a Casualty.

Prevent Heat and Cold Weather Injuries.

Call For Fire - voice and digitally.

Certainly, there are additions leaders could make to these lists. The list offers a foundation on which to build and allows for the basic combat functions of any organization.

The platoon sergeant is critical in ensuring the first-line leader is competent and confident to train his soldiers. There must be a training and evaluation outline for small unit and individual tasks. There must be an evaluation done at the completion of training. The platoon sergeant is invaluable in assessing the small unit tasks subordinate to the platoon tasks. The platoon sergeant is the evaluator for small unit collective tasks within his platoon. A problem exists here because many platoon sergeants have never understood training management doctrine and therefore, have never executed training as outlined in *FM 25-101*. We must train platoon sergeants, first sergeants, and command sergeants major to one Army standard. This preparation includes checking the training and evaluation outline, checking the leader to ensure he is competent to train the task, checking to ensure proper resources are on-hand, and checking that the leader book is annotated properly with an accurate

training status. Soldiers perceive well-prepared first-line leaders as competent and confident. This is critical.

In units undergoing transition, Sergeants' Time XXI can't be limited to only one templated day and time during the week. Training in these units simply does not allow for this. We must train first-line leaders to manage blocks of time that occur on an irregular basis. This is nothing more than what we have now as opportunity training or "hip pocket training." This will be difficult. It will require the dedication of the unit leadership to accomplish this. It will require platoon and company training meetings to be conducted to standard. This is not NCO business — it is leader business.

I offer a few suggestions for fixing the problems presented. We must begin with Training and Doctrine Command and NCOES. Identify what we expect noncommissioned officers to do and see how that relates to current programs of instruction. I think we will see that there is a difference in what we expect from noncommissioned officers doctrinally as training managers and what we teach them. A leader-teach for officers and noncommissioned officers on the definition, standard, and execution of Sergeants' Time must be accomplished to place the Army on one standard. We all have our own idea of what Sergeants' Time is. In defining Sergeants' Time, we must look at the Army in transformation and determine what is best for this particular environment. The senior leadership must achieve consensus on the definition and then be not only supportive, but ruthlessly enforce the standard. There is one other alternative: If we can't define or enforce the standard, then eliminate Sergeants' Time. I do not recommend this alternative. Sergeants' Time XXI gives us leaders who can navigate through the transition process. It gives us competent, confident first-line leaders that soldiers trust. It gives us leaders that can manage time effectively and train soldiers to standard on individual and collective tasks that support the METL. We must develop these leaders now.

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